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ABSTRACT

This report describes the outcomes of a federally funded project that was designed to train master's degree students as early interventionists with skills and abilities to work with infants and toddlers with low incidence disabilities and their families. The low incidence disabilities that were the focus of the training were multisystem developmental disorders (MSDD) and significant neurobehavioral disorders (SNBD). The goals of the project were: (1) to recruit and enroll a diverse group of students; (2) to develop a training curriculum reflective of best practices in early intervention; (3) to develop a master's degree curriculum reflective of new knowledge in the area of infants and toddlers with MSDD and SNBD and their families; (4) to increase awareness and expertise in the early intervention community; and (5) to implement a management plan that ensures effective, proper, and efficient administration of the project. Over the course of three years the project was able to meet all of these goals. A summary of its accomplishments and challenges is presented according to each to the five goals. (Author/SG)

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No-Cost Extension Report

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No-Cost Extension Performance Report

The Low Incidence Disabilities Project received a no-cost extension for the 2001-2002 year to enable two students to complete their program. These students completed the master's degree program in Infant Special Education in August 2002. The two students received tuition support for 27 credits for a total expenditure of $17,253.80, leaving a balance of $7,142.84.

The completion of the degree program by the two students increased the total number of graduates funded under the project to 34. Please refer to the attached Final Grant Performance Report submitted FILL IN DATE for summative project information.

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The George Washington University
Graduate School of Education and Human Development
Department of Teacher Preparation and Special Education
Infant Special Education Program

INTERIM PROJECT REPORT
LOW INCIDENCE DISABILITIES PROJECT

I. Overview of Project Purpose

The Low Incidence Disabilities Project (LID) has trained 34 master's degree students as early interventionists with skills and abilities to work with infants and toddlers with low incidence disabilities and their families. The low incidence disabilities that were the focus of the training are multisystem developmental disorders (MSDD) and significant neurobehavioral disorders (SNBD). This 39 hour master's degree program addressed the urgent training needs in the area of low incidence disabilities and provided training experiences that focus on current challenging issues in the field.

The project was based on a firm commitment to provide trandisciplinary, family-centered services to infants and toddlers with low incidence disabilities. Professional development partnerships were established with multiple field sites to provide students with quality internship placements. Professional Development Partnerships provided students and faculty with the linkages to the realities that sites face when working with infants and toddlers with low incidence disabilities and their families. Collaborative activities between university faculty, students and professionals in the field included participatory action research (PAR) projects and professional development workshops (PDW). Students reflected on their professional growth and their readiness to assume the responsibility of an early intervention professional in a professional portfolio developed throughout the program and presented an oral defense to the faculty in lieu of a comprehensive examination.

The goals of the project were: (1) to recruit and enroll a diverse group of students, (2) to develop a training curriculum reflective of best practices in early intervention, (3) to develop a master's degree curriculum reflective of new knowledge in the area of infants and toddlers with MSDD and SNBD and their families, (4) to increase awareness and expertise in the early intervention community, and (5) to implement a management plan that ensures effective, proper, and efficient administration of the project.

II. Summary of Project Goals --- Accomplishments and Challenges

Over the course of three years the LID project was able to meet all of the goals set forth in the strategic plan developed from the workscope of the project detailed in the initial grant proposal. (See Appendix A – Strategic plan.) A summary of

project accomplishments and challenges faced during the project is presented below according to each of the project goals.

A. Objective 1: Recruit and Enroll a Diverse Group of Students.

Accomplishments

The LID master's degree program admitted of a total of 37 students from diverse and underrepresented populations during the first two years of the program. In addition to cultural and ethnic diversity, the program admitted 3 students with identified disabilities and 1 male student. The student population was also very diverse with regard to previous professional experiences and professional backgrounds. Of the 34 students who completed or are projected to complete the program, nine had previous early intervention or teaching experience, four were occupational therapists, four were registered nurses, three were physical therapists, one was a social worker and one had an undergraduate degree in speech and hearing.

ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS OF STUDENTS

SEMESTER/YEAR	CAUCASIAN	AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINO	ASIAN
Summer 1999	5	0	0	0
Summer 2000	6	5	0	1
Spring 2001	1	0	0	0
Summer 2001	8	4	1	0
Fall 2001	0	1	0	0
Summer 2002	1	1	0	0
TOTAL	**21**	**11**	**1**	**1**

As of July 2001 31 students have graduated, three are projected to graduate during the 2001-2002 school year and three withdrew from the program for personal reasons. All three students that withdrew left the program in their first semester. In general student retention was excellent.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS COMPLETING LID PROGRAM

SEMESTER/YEAR	FULL TIME	PART TIME
Summer 1999	5	0
Summer 2000	5	7
Spring 2001	1	0
Summer 2001	6	7
Fall 2001 (projected)	0	1
Summer 2002 (projected)	0	2
TOTAL	**17**	**17**

Challenges

Recruitment nationally was one of the projects biggest challenges. Recruitment efforts for LID program candidates were numerous and diverse. Recruitment efforts included open houses of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University, national recruitment fairs, advertisement in national journals, dissemination of brochures at national conferences, the LID web page and regular faculty contact with local early intervention and early childhood special education programs. Despite these numerous avenues for recruiting students nationally, all students came from the northeast region of the country with the exception of one international student and two students from the Midwest. In addition although we received many inquiries from the open houses almost all students who were admitted learned about the program either by word of mouth or the LID web page.

B. Objective 2: Develop a Training Curriculum Reflective of Best Practice
Objective 3: Develop a Curriculum Reflective of New Knowledge of MSDD and SNBD.

Accomplishments

To ensure that the training curriculum was reflective of both best practice and of new knowledge regarding MSDD and SNBD, the project staff developed several new program components that were integrated across the course work and field work.

New Program Components included:

- New and Revised coursework/competencies
- Professional Development Workshops
- Collaborative Participatory Action Research Projects
- Infant/Family Portfolios
- Regional Forums each Summer Semester
- Professional Portfolios

Development and evaluation of the new program components was accomplished by the establishment of an advisory committee and holding faculty reflection sessions. The advisory committee consisted of professionals in both early intervention and early childhood special education in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. This committee met twice during each academic year of the project. During the meetings, committee members shared their concerns and needs in the field. The LID project's staff reflected upon the concerns and needs and addressed them through curricular changes. The advisory committee also reviewed the Infant Special Education competencies and provided valuable feedback on the organization and content of the competencies. The program faculty and staff revised the program competencies in year

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one of the project. These new competencies provided the foundation for development of student professional portfolios.

Faculty reflection sessions were held at the end of each semester. During these meetings the faculty reviewed all courses taught the previous semester and reflected upon best practice and integration of new knowledge into the coursework. Course content, readings and assignments were reviewed and discussed and changes were made based on faculty reviews, advisory committee recommendations and student feedback from course evaluations and individual meetings with the faculty. From the reflective discussions, changes in courses were made to ensure integration of program concepts across all coursework.

Challenges

One of the main challenges was finding field placement sites that were using best practice. Field placements included public and private early intervention programs, Early Head Start programs, hospital clinics and public school systems. Most professionals in the field placement sites could articulate the importance of trandisciplinary, family-centered early intervention services; however, the actual delivery of services often did not reflect this model. The second challenge faced by project staff was related to the narrow definition of low incidence disabilities in this project. Technically many of these low incidence disabilities required a medical diagnosis. In many cases infants and toddlers are not given a medical diagnosis before early intervention services can be of great benefit to the child and family. Trying to focus a curriculum solely on the low incidence disabilities defined by this project was not in the best interests of all children and families we serve in early intervention. The project faculty and staff found that in order to be reflective of best practice training needed to focus on low incidence disabilities but also encompass developmental disability, delay and risk. The final ongoing challenge was learning about and integrating the abundance of new research and knowledge into the coursework.

C. Objective 4: Increase Awareness and Expertise in the Early Intervention Community

Accomplishments

Three of the new program components, infant/family portfolios, collaborative participatory action research projects, and professional development workshop were important in increasing awareness and expertise in the early intervention community. These three student assignments were integrated into the internship and were done collaboratively with the field sites.

The infant/family portfolio has five components: statement of purpose, IFSP goals with documentation, reflections about each artifact, progress summary and recommendations. The purpose of the infant/family portfolio was to document developmental progress of an infant or toddler. Students consulted with their site supervisor about families in the program to determine which family might be interested in constructing a portfolio. By developing infant/family portfolios collaboratively, the concept of authentic assessment in natural settings was modeled for the staff of the field sites.

All students and their field supervisors completed collaborative participatory action research projects. All research topics were developed in collaboration with the teams at the field sites. Topics included service delivery issues and infant and family issues related to early intervention and low incidence disabilities. (see appendix B for list of projects) Students completed a literature review, performed data collection and analysis, and wrote a final report. Results were presented by the students and field supervisors in a poster presentation at the annual Regional Forum held during the summer semester in each year of the project.

The third and final assignment during the internship was the professional development workshop. Students did a needs assessment at their field placement site and held discussions with program staff to determine the most appropriate topic. Students then developed and presented the workshop on site. Topics included policy issues and infant and family issues related to early intervention and low incidence disabilities. (see appendix C for list of workshops) All workshops included participant activities, audio-visuals and handouts. The student's university supervisor and the project training coordinator were present for all workshops.

Other steps to increase awareness and expertise in the early intervention community included the LID web site, an annual regional forum, an annual site supervisor workshop and project staff presentations on program components at national, state and local conferences.

The LID web site was developed at the end of year one of the project. In addition to playing a crucial role in recruitment the web site was designed to increase awareness and expertise in the early intervention community. The web site contained information about the project, project definitions and program competencies. In addition, several collaborative participatory action research projects were published on the site. The LID web site also provided links to other web sites with information on low incidence disabilities.

Three regional forums were held during the course of the project. The forums were part of a one week long policy course, which was required for all students. Forum topics included autism in years one and three and natural environments in year two. Each year during the forum the current students completing their internships developed and presented poster presentations of their collaborative participatory action research.

In an effort to facilitate reflective supervision on site, project staff developed a site supervisor workshop for internship site supervisors. This workshop was presented to all site supervisors in year two and three of the project. The objectives of the workshop were to promote continuity of training across field sites; review assignments required during the internship; negotiate expectations of each member of the triad, student intern, site supervisor and university supervisor; and introduce the developmental reflective supervision model.

Project faculty presented at two national conferences, one state conference and one local university supervisor meeting. Integrating Action Research into an Infant Special Education Curriculum to Promote Reflective Practice was presented at both the annual TED conference and the annual CEC conference in year two of the project. Infant and family portfolios were part of a presentation at the VA CEC annual conference in year three of the project. Finally, project faculty presented their developmental reflective supervision model at the monthly supervision meeting for the Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

Challenges

The primary challenge was working with early intervention sites that were not practicing best practice. As stated with the previous objectives, many of the professionals at the field sites were able to articulate the key components of best practice, but often carry over in actual practice in the field was lacking.

D. Objective 5: Implement an Effective Management Plan

Accomplishments

To help frame and guide the work of the grant a strategic plan and evaluation plan were developed. Project faculty and staff met monthly to review the strategic plan activities and engage in formative evaluation of the program. In addition to monthly staff meetings, faculty also met regularly with students at the end of each semester to review the student's program plan and discuss any issues regarding the student's progress. Finally program faculty and staff met at the end of each semester to reflect on the course work and field work and make changes as necessary.

Evaluation of the program was done by course evaluations, focus groups and exit interviews with graduating students. Course evaluations throughout the three years of the project were positive with suggestions for relatively minor changes. Students indicated that course objectives were met, assignments were valuable and assigned readings expanded their knowledge base. Specific recommendations for changes to course work and field work were considered faculty reflection sessions and changes were subsequently made to the curriculum.

An outside evaluator held focus groups with graduating students at the end of years one and two. Ten questions to guide the discussion were prepared by the evaluator with consultation of the faculty. Full time and part time students were in separate groups. According to the students strengths of the program included supportive faculty members, classroom discussions regarding experiences on site, professional portfolio development in lieu of comprehensive examinations and strong sense of identity as a group. Concerns raised included the heavy workload in the spring semester for the full time students, the need for more diversity in internship sites, the need for more guidance in finding employment after graduation and making the action research assignment a more meaningful experience. Exit interviews in lieu of focus group evaluations will be completed with the students graduating at the end of summer session in year three.

Challenges

Project faculty and staff did not experience any challenges with regard to implementing an effective management plan.

III. Expenditures

The majority of the tuition was expended during the three years of the project. A no cost extension has been obtained in order to enable three students to complete coursework for degree completion.

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